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AUTHOR Limbrick, Libby
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ABSTRACT

The 1970 International Educational Achievement (IEA) survey had placed New Zealand's nine- and fourteen-year-olds first in reading achievement in comparison with all other participating countries. By the time the 1990 IEA survey took place, however, mean achievement levels had slipped somewhat, and by the mid-1990s New Zealand's reputation was becoming tattered. Subsequent analyses of the 1990 survey indicated that while the country had high means and very high achievement, it also had the greatest difference between high achievers and low achievers. This paper considers what has happened in New Zealand to bring about these changes. The paper discusses demographic changes, political changes, teacher shortages, the plethora of educational publishers aiming for a global market, the public's response, and the government's response. It also considers what is happening now, a year after the Taskforce Report. It states that the government set a goal of enhanced reading and writing achievement of children in the first four years of schooling. Noting that the next international comparison is imminent, the paper concludes that: literacy educators must be able to articulate their clear understanding of the constituents of effective practice; literacy teaching must be based on the perceptive assessment of children's strengths and needs, informed by current and relevant research; literacy teaching must use implicit and explicit approaches that are balanced to the needs of children and avoid single "silver bullet" solutions; and strong community and family links are essential for acknowledging and building on the increasing diversity in the schools. Contains 11 references. (NKA)

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by Libby Limbrick

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L. Limbrick

18TH WORLD CONGRESS ON READING

NEW ZEALAND'S RESPONSE TO THE LITERACY ISSUES OF THE 1990'S

Dr Libby Limbrick, Auckland College of Education, Auckland, New Zealand

As 1990 dawned New Zealand was still basking in the glow of being seen by the rest of the world as providing the acme of reading education. The International Educational Achievement survey of 1970 had placed New Zealand's nine and fourteen year olds first in reading achievement in comparison with all other participating countries. We had held, for the past two decades, an enviable position in the literacy stakes of the world. Literacy educators from many parts of the world were studying our methods and classroom environments; our literacy materials had been exported to other parts of the world; and our approaches to reading and writing instruction were being adopted in many countries.

Throughout the world educators were aware of Sylvia Ashton Warner and Don Holdaway and their philosophies. Their emphasis on building literacy instruction on the experiences of the child and the importance of using natural language texts and the inter-relatedness of reading and writing have influenced instruction in a number of other countries as well as New Zealand.

A centralized Department of Education with a strong curriculum division guided the teaching of literacy, the six Teachers' Colleges maintained collegial communication, and classroom practice was supported by the superb publications of the Department of Education's publishing arm, School Publications.

A consistent and coherent base to classroom literacy teaching was ensured by school access to professional development models such as the Early Reading In-service Course and the Later Reading In-service.

Reading Recovery, developed by Marie Clay in the 1970's, had become a key intervention programme in many states of the USA, in UK and in Australia. And in the early 1990's Time magazine wrote an article eulogizing our levels of literacy and the instructional approaches in our schools.

So then came 1990 IEA survey (Elley, 1992). Things were still pretty good, although our mean achievement levels had slipped. Twenty years on from the stunning results of 1970, our 14 year olds were ranked 4th and our 9 years olds were ranked 7th. This was still a significant achievement especially when an analysis of the data demonstrates that we have more "good readers" than any

other country. Furthermore our fourteen year olds, whose home language was that of the school, English, scored the highest in the world. We were still at the crest of the wave and the overseas plaudits kept coming.

However, by the mid 90's our reputation appeared to be becoming tattered. The media started lamenting the falling literacy standards of young people with newspaper headlines such as *"New Zealand Loses Its Crown in Reading". "What's wrong with reading?" "Why can't NZ children read?"*

Talk back radio and populist journalism started claiming that children can't write, spell and read as well as their parents when they were at school. Although these public concerns were the result of fairly superficial and negative interpretations of reports on literacy levels, nonetheless educators were concerned.

SO WHAT WAS HAPPENING?

Subsequent analyses of the 1990 IEA survey indicated that whilst we had high means, and very high achievement, we had the greatest difference between high achievers and low achievers. These achievement gaps were between boys and girls, and between children for whom the language of home was that of the school and those for whom it was not. Amongst the low achievers were high numbers of Maori and Pacific Island students and students in low decile schools. It would appear that New Zealand's literacy education was not meeting the needs of all children in our society.

A national study of school achievement also identified some worrying trends. The National Educational Monitoring Project of Reading and Speaking (Flockton and Crooks, 1997) and Listening and Writing (Flockton and Crooks, 1999), reported that, whereas 80% of children were reading at levels "normal" for their year group, once again Maori and Pacific Island, and children for whom English is a second language, are in the lowest scoring ranges. These children were reading at levels significantly lower than for non-Maori and non-Pacific Island children. The National Educational Monitoring Project uses contextualised assessment tasks linked to the curriculum achievement objectives to establish a profile of achievement for students in Year 4 (9 years olds) and children in Year 8 (12-13 years olds). It assesses a representative national sample, in four-year cycles, over a range of curriculum areas.

In a survey of adult literacy in 1996 of prose, narrative and quantitative literacy the preliminary findings of an international comparison indicated that about one third of New Zealand adults demonstrated literacy levels below that required to operate efficiently in today's society. Clearly this is of concern. Further

analysis of the data shows that those in the 50 year old and above cohorts achieved lowest mean scores. This belies the claim that standards of literacy are dropping and indicates that factors other than current school based literacy practices must be involved. Once again, however, amongst those with low levels of literacy were a very high percentage of Maori, Pacific Island and other ethnic minority adults and especially amongst those who were early school leavers.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO BRING ABOUT THESE CHANGES?

Demographic changes

A number of factors have contributed to the changing literacy profile in New Zealand. Immigration patterns in recent years have changed so that the number of children in schools from backgrounds other than English has greatly increased. Whereas in the 1970's the population of most schools consisted mainly of Pakeha and Maori children, schools today are multi-ethnic with many children entering school with little or no English. Furthermore, for some children home/school expectations of, and experiences with, literacy are markedly divergent. These differences are reflected in children's literacy knowledge and school based language practices on transition to school. Recently School Entry Assessment (Gilmore, 1998) has identified large differences in children's oral English language competence and concepts about print at school entry as measured on a story retelling task.

Socio-economic factors and government policies have led to a greater polarization of wealth and living conditions which in turn, despite government funding policies to support low decile schools, is reflected in school resources and support structures. Maori and Pacific Island children are overly represented in low decile areas and thus they are frequently in schools struggling to meet today's educational demands.

Political changes

In 1988 the report "Tomorrow's Schools: The reform of Educational Administration in New Zealand" introduced radical reforms into the New Zealand Educational scene. A triumvirate of the Ministry of Education, The Education Review Office and Special Education Services was established. A consequent move to self managing schools under Boards of Trustees led to greater devolution of school administration, professional development and an emphasis schools developing their own charters.

Alongside this was the development of a centralized New Zealand Curriculum Framework (MOE 1993) with seven Essential Learning Areas and Essential Skills: a re packaging thus re-development thus of all curriculum areas. Schools,

thus, over the past decade have had to cope with coming to terms with greater responsibility for administration, and new curriculum documents in traditional and new curriculum areas. The English in the New Zealand Curriculum was gazetted in 1994. It re-conceptualized the English curriculum into three strands, oral, written and visual and 8 levels of achievement. Achievement objectives for each level and exemplars of work were presented but no prescription or guidance as to methodology to achieve these objectives. The Education Review Office, acting as an independent monitor for schools accountability, replaced the School Inspectorate, which although seen as punitive at times had also provided guidance and insight for teachers.

The nett result of all this has been greater demands on schools and teachers in having to cope with increased responsibility, diversity and content for curriculum concurrent with increased diversity of teachers and children in schools.

Teacher education

In the mid 1990's New Zealand was hit by a marked teacher shortage especially in northern urban areas. Teachers were recruited from UK, Australia, Canada. As a result numbers of teachers, trained under systems with differing philosophy on literacy education joined the New Zealand teaching force. Often these teachers were appointed to schools in low decile areas, who traditionally find it harder to recruit staff. These schools are also those with the highest proportions of Maori, Pacific Island and Non English Speaking Students.

Furthermore provision of teacher education has changed within recent years. Today, with the Government's encouragement of private training institutions, there are now over 20 university, polytechnic, College of Education and private providers in contrast to six a decade ago. Thus, combined with Government funding for shorter courses, especially post graduate courses, it appears that teachers' education is more variable.

Publishing for global markets

One further influence on the literacy learning environment has been the plethora of educational publishers, who, building on New Zealand's reputation, developed resources with global markets in mind. While this had the advantage of increasing resources available to schools, it meant that i) schools were targets of publishing hard-sell and ii) unlike the School publications, produced especially for New Zealand were less focused on the interests and experiences of our children.

THE RESPONSE

The public response: a crisis in confidence and back to the basics.
Public and media response has led to some groups responding in a pendulum shift way: advocating dramatic change in literacy instruction methodology. Debates through the media became extremely polarizing and at times vitriolic with a flush of articles with titles such as *"The Phonic Wars"; "Whole Language? Phonics? Reading debate rages on"*.

Some critics have asserted that it is the philosophy underlying literacy instruction that is inadequate: that New Zealand's holistic, natural language philosophy of literacy instruction does not meet the needs of all learners. They have recommended that New Zealand adopt phonics based programmes such as those mandated in California on the grounds that California's adoption of skills based phonic programmes was because Whole Language, influenced by New Zealand, programmes had led to declining standards.

This claim needs examination. Several points should be noted:

i) methodology is unlikely to be the only cause of any reported literacy level decline. California demographics have changed in recent years with greater numbers of non-English speaking people and, contemporaneously, a reduction in resources for bilingual programmes;

ii) the tests used for comparative purposes may not be appropriate as they do not provide information on the population as a whole, only on those intending to enter University,

iii) California's adoption of New Zealand methodology was piecemeal: the result of intermittent workshops in the USA; short term visits by US educators to New Zealand and the marketing by publishers of New Zealand resources in the USA. New Zealand does not advocate a Whole Language Programme as promoted in California

New Zealand programmes emphasise holistic and balanced approaches using natural language, in contrast to contrived decodable texts, in which the teaching of skills play
an important part unlike the more extreme Whole Language Programmes. In New Zealand instructional programmes word level skills are explicitly taught but in relation to the learner's need and the context in which they are used.

The Government's Response

In October 1998 the New Zealand Minister of Education announced a Literacy (and Numeracy) strategy. A Literacy Taskforce was formed to examine the issues. The Minister announced the goal that *"By 2005 every child turning 9 will be able to read and write (and do maths) for success"*. This taskforce, consisting of classroom practitioners, principals, literacy consultants, teacher educators and representatives of the Ministry of Education were advised by a Literacy Experts Group, academics with theoretical and research expertise in literacy. It was also the intention of the Ministry to bring this group of people together, who were frequently put into different "camps" by the media, to examine the issues in depth rather than sensationally!

The LEG based their advice on recent reports on literacy, including the extensive work reported by Snow et al (1998) in the USA, the Australian report on Literacy for All (1998)" as well as international and New Zealand based research.

Working to a tight timeline the Taskforce identified a number of issues affecting literacy instruction and contributing to the disparity between those students not succeeding in literacy and the high achievers. The report submitted to the Minister of Education in April made a range of recommendations, a number of which are being implemented already.

The Taskforce did not recommend a major change in the philosophy or practice of literacy instruction in New Zealand. Neither did it recommend prescribing specific literacy approaches or practices. However it made it clear that that what was needed to address the great disparity in achievement was not " bigger doses of the same". The system it was stated needed tweaking not changing.

There was a strong reminder to teachers and schools of the importance of a balanced approach, and of being aware of the need to support children to develop appropriate strategies for breaking the code, in order to make meaning of the text. The essential role of phonemic awareness in early literacy acquisition was stressed. Most of the recommendations emphasised the need to enhance and refine existing practice through supporting teachers and schools to make informed decisions for teaching.

Central to a number of the recommendations was on going professional development for teachers, principals and literacy leaders in a school. It was recommended that the principles of "best practice" be debated and established and that a shared understanding of the knowledge, understandings and attitudes that one would expect of a 9 year old, reading and writing for success, be developed by literacy educators. These profiles of achievement should be the

basis of assessing the achievement of the Government's goal rather than externally referenced and administered assessment tasks.

The Taskforce recommended a professional development package focusing on effective use of teaching approaches, monitoring and assessment, particularly the use of running records and stressed that professional development be accessible and on-going for all teachers.

Also recommended, was a review of teacher education in literacy to ascertain how well teachers are prepared for teaching in the critical years of literacy acquisition. It was also recommended that the Education Review Office, the body with responsibility for monitoring the implementation of the National Educational Guidelines and the National Achievement Guidelines, be required to explicitly report on literacy and numeracy in the first years of school.

New Zealand schools are fortunate in having a superb system such as Reading Recovery and Resource Teachers of Reading, who work with children needing intervention beyond this first phase. However the taskforce recognised that these two services needed to be nationally co-ordinated, reviewed to enhance their effectiveness and targeted at children who are currently not achieving.

No single pedagogical approach will meet the needs of all children. Reading Recovery has for more than twenty years now provided a catch up opportunity for 20% of New Zealand children who, because of differing early educational experiences, learning styles and language backgrounds, can have difficulty with literacy. The policy is that the lowest achieving children in any school, at the end of their first year, at school will have access to Reading Recovery. However this may mean that many children, particularly those in low decile schools, do not receive the support they need to develop successful strategies. Without unlimited resources this may mean intervention resources need to be targeted to those who need them most.

Paradoxically, despite a considerable body of research demonstrating its efficacy in other countries, there is limited independent research in New Zealand on Reading Recovery (Askew, Fountas, Lyons, Pinnell & Schmitt, 1998). One study (Tunmer & Chapman 1998), restricted to a fairly small sample, suggested that Reading Recovery did not meet the needs of children with poorly developed phonemic awareness: those who were most likely to be in the lowest 20% of their cohort. Questions have also been asked as to the timing of Reading Recovery intervention. Is six years too late to identify under achievement trends, and intervene, for some children? For other children maximum benefit from Reading Recovery may be gained later when oral

language skills are better developed. For children who enter school from backgrounds other than English this would appear an important consideration.

WHAT IS HAPPENING NOW?

It is a year since the release of the Taskforce Report and we are well into the new decade. There has been a change of Government but not a change of heart. Some recommendations have been put into place and the new Government is committed to " closing the gaps"

- For the past year a **"Feed the Mind" campaign** targeted at families, whanau and communities has been in place through TV and print media. The Taskforce and the Ministry recognises the critical role that parents and community play in literacy development therefore a communication strategy targeted at the communities most at risk, the low income communities and Maori and Pacific Island communities, has been established. This communication strategy stresses the importance of literacy activities and the accessibility of literacy in everyday activities. Colourful and informative pamphlets have been distributed widely especially in low decile areas to support family and whanau in the critical role they play in children becoming literate. These have been produced in a wide range of community languages. Many schools are using these family friendly resources as a focus for workshops to further involve their community in the literacy lives of their children.

- A **Proposals Fund** was established to which Decile 1 schools could apply to support literacy initiatives. Funding would only be granted if the proposal could demonstrate the following criteria:
  - how the needs of the target group would be met;
  - development of teacher expertise,
  - community involvement,
  - sustainability overtime,
  - that it reflected "best practice"
  - proven effectiveness.

Rigorous criteria that have been planned to make a difference in closing the gaps. These projects have ranged from professional development for staff to introduction of new resources packages. Of concern however is that schools who have been able to write convincing proposals have had greater access to funds than schools without such support.

- **The National Administration Guidelines** have been amended to require schools to give priority to developing programmes for, and to reporting on

student achievement in, literacy in Years 1 to 4. Schools feeling pressured to report equally on all curriculum areas for each year can now legitimate a critical literacy and numeracy emphasis in the early years. Schools are also required to demonstrate that they consult with Maori and other community groups to improve achievement for Maori in school.

- **Literacy Leadership in New Zealand Schools**. Principals have been encouraged to take back the literacy leadership in their school. A nation wide professional development programme, spanning two years, for all primary schools in New Zealand with an extra enhancement component for school seeking extra support is underway. Facilitators throughout the country are guiding principals or school literacy leaders in reviewing their school policies in the light of current professional knowledge and research.

- **A range of professional resources** have been developed

  - A core handbook for literacy in junior classes for the past 15 years has been *Reading in Junior Classes*. Although this is still a superb resource it needs revision in the light of current research especially that on the place of phonemic awareness. Currently in development it should be in schools to support programmes by next year.

  - The Taskforce expressed concern that many teachers were not using *Running Records* to optimally tailor instruction to learners' needs. To guide new teachers and re focus more experienced teachers, a video on "Using Running Records in the Classroom" is about to be released.

  - *Resources in Te Reo*. While most Maori children are educated in mainstream classrooms increasing numbers are in Maori immersion or bilingual programmes. The move to Maori immersion educational settings, Te Kohanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa, has been partly in response to Maori recognising that their children have not succeeded in the mainstream, as well as commitment to maintaining the Maori language and culture. The Literacy Taskforce thus identified an urgent need to develop instructional resources, including a wider range of levelled reading materials; assessment tasks; and professional development in Maori to ensure the literacy gap is reduced. Simply translating English resources, either for teachers or students, into a Maori medium does not provide appropriate support. For Maori children literacy instructional needs are different. For example Maori is a phonetically regular language unlike English.

- For many Maori children in immersion settings Maori is not the language of their home because, until recently, Maori language has been declining in use. Whereas the principles of best practice may be applicable, the instructional approaches must match their learning needs. As such, a Maori translation of Reading Recovery is not likely to overcome their achievement needs. A similar but specific programme needs to be developed.

- *Assessment* - The Taskforce recommended that further externally referenced assessment tools be developed in both English and Maori. Work on exemplars of writing to support diagnostic and summative assessment is underway. Furthermore there is now a Maori equivalent of the Observation Survey suitable for use in Kura Kaupapa Schools.

- **Resource Teachers of Literacy**

As the Taskforce met there were 68 Resource Teachers of Reading throughout New Zealand whose role it is to work with students who, for a number of reasons, are still experiencing literacy difficulties in Years 3 and beyond. This group of experienced teachers are faced with some of the greatest challenges in literacy teaching. Their workloads are great and they do not have specialist training to prepare them to meet the challenges they face. The Taskforce recommended a review. Within the month prior to the Congress it was announced that the numbers would be increased to 121 and a proposal for a qualification to underpin their professional work has been placed before the Ministry.

- **A statement of "Best Practice"**

Spurred by the Taskforce's discussion of the need for a statement on " best practice", the New Zealand Reading Association undertook a collaborative task with its members throughout New Zealand. Uncomfortable with the notion that "best practice" implies prescriptive methodology, the NZRA Executive decided on the title of Principles of Effective practice which underpin Literacy Instruction in New Zealand. Debating what constitutes effective literacy practices has sharpened and refocused teachers understanding of essential aspects of their literacy programmes. A copy is attached to this paper.

- **School wide professional development**

A number of schools are undertaking school wide professional development involving their full staff in qualification based literacy courses, such as those offered under Higher and Advanced Diplomas for teachers. These courses and the Professional Leadership Contract for Principals have potential to impact positively on the quality of literacy programmes throughout NZ .

HOW WILL THE GOVERNMENT GOAL BE MEASURED?

One of the great dilemmas in education is developing authentic and manageable assessment tools. The IEA analysis noted that close monitoring was associated with high levels of achievement. It was suggested that cumulative records of students progress be developed so that ongoing monitoring and informed teaching can support learners even those who are transient.

A previous green paper on Assessment had advised against standardized national assessment tasks. The Taskforce endorsed this view and recommended the development of externally referenced assessment tools against which schools can assess their children. The process of developing profiles of the 9 year old reader and writer are now under way.

AND SO TO THE FUTURE

The Government set as its goal the enhanced reading and writing achievement of children in the first four years of schooling. If we are to ensure literacy for all, I believe, however, that there is another and almost greater challenge for schools today, certainly for schools in New Zealand. If we can ensure that the *espoused* principles of best practice in junior classes *are* the practices of best practice we will have achieved a lot. But another critical issue today is ensuring that "best practice" continues into the middle and upper primary schools. There must be ongoing development of literacy skills to deal with the increasing complexity of texts, for example, Internet texts, which are often dense in structure and represent views from diverse perspectives and are from sources that have dubious validity and credibility. Research (Flockton & Crooks, 1997, 1999) suggests that our children are reading, orally, with accuracy and with adequate retelling of the content. For many children the challenge lies in processing the information and responding with higher order levels of text analysis, and in conveying their ideas coherently, cogently and accurately in writing especially in the upper years of primary and early years of secondary schooling.

CONCLUSION

The next international comparison is imminent. Next year the Progress in Reading Literacy, may well remind us that closing the gaps is challenging and complex. There are significant implications for us as literacy educators that arise from the debates of the issues over recent years. I believe that they include:-

- Literacy educators must be able to articulate their clear understanding of the constituents of effective practice

- Literacy teaching must be based on the perceptive assessment of children's strengths and needs and be informed by current and relevant research and professional debate.
- Literacy teaching must use implicit and explicit approaches that are balanced to the needs of children and avoids single "silver bullet" solutions.
- Strong community and family links are essential if we are to acknowledge and build on the increasing diversity in our schools.

Debate about and implementation of a number of the recommendations of the Literacy Taskforce has heightened has put literacy at the top of the school achievement agenda. The momentum will be maintained only if the Ministry of Education, schools, teacher educators and the community work closely together.

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